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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: OPPOSITION MEMBERS IN KIRBALI ALLEGE  
UNWARRANTED POLICE QUESTIONING

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and comment. Residents of the village of Kirbali associated with the opposition told OSCE that sometime during the week of March 15-21, local police officers approached them at their homes in the evening and asked questions for no apparent reason. Details of the report are sketchy, because the military monitors do not focus on these types of issues, and the rest of the OSCE mission -- including its political and human rights officers -- feel hamstrung by the limbo of having no mandate. The Ministry of Internal Affairs denied the incident to EmbOff, saying that police forces do run evening patrols through the village (which is just south of the South Ossetian administrative boundary), but have not questioned any locals recently. It is difficult to judge the veracity of the report without access to first-hand information. Growing apprehension about the April 9 protests, however, and their potential impact on the areas adjacent to the administrative boundary could explain a misunderstanding on one or both sides. Post will continue to urge restraint on all sides. End summary and comment.

¶2. (C) According to OSCE sources, on March 24, OSCE military monitors on a daytime patrol in Kirbali, a village just south of the administrative boundary and east of Tskhinvali, were approached by group of local residents. The residents identified themselves as members of the opposition. They said that during the previous week, police officers arrived in the village with a list of residents who support the opposition, which reportedly originated from the previous election. Then, later in the week, the police approached some of those on the list in the evening at their homes with some questions. The residents described the questions as innocuous and did not allege any mistreatment, but such an approach by the police seemed unusual and arbitrary to them, and they therefore wanted to inform the OSCE monitors. According to the OSCE, there was no suggestion that the police officers were plainclothes officers, nor was there any question that they were police officers. In a conversation with EmbOff, an OSCE monitor agreed that approaching villagers in the evening at their homes was unusual and could be perceived, however innocuous the questions, as an effort to intimidate.

¶3. (C) EmbOff called Shota Utiashvili, Director of the Interior Ministry Analytical Department, to ask about the incident. He was unaware of it, but made some inquiries. He later told EmbOff that the local police told him that they had conducted evening patrols in Kirbali in the timeframe described, as is their normal practice, but had not conducted any such questioning. (Note: All villages located in close proximity to the administrative boundary are subject to heightened tension, and the police normally maintain a visible, daily presence in them. Residents of such sensitive areas will even complain to international monitors if they perceive an insufficient police presence in their village. End note.)

¶4. (C) As an OSCE political officer explained, the military monitors normally focus on military movements and issues. Although they accepted the information, they did not conduct extensive interviews with the individuals or take other actions (such as questioning the local police) to pursue the report more vigorously. They are also unlikely to take any report more vigorously. They are also unlikely to take any specific steps to follow up, other than send another patrol through the village according to their normal schedule. The OSCE personnel who would normally focus more on such issues, the political and human rights officers, are still working at the main office in Tbilisi, but without a real mandate, so they feel constrained in their ability to operate.

COMMENT: THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY

¶5. (C) Without direct access to the villagers themselves or the police officers who normally conduct patrols in the area, it is difficult to determine what exactly happened, if anything. An OSCE monitor did note, however, that he has recently perceived an increase in apprehension along the boundary in connection with the impending April 9 protests. Villagers are concerned that, if local police officers are pulled away from the boundary area to help monitor the protests, South Ossetian militia or other forces from north of the boundary could try to take advantage of the resulting vacuum and cross the boundary and instigate trouble. Post will continue to urge restraint on all sides as we approach April 9.  
TEFFT